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Analysing voice in educational discourses

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Analysing Voice in Educational Discourses

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“The vision of voice unites two kinds of freedom: freedom from denial of opportunity due to something linguistic; and freedom for satisfaction in the use of language. In other words: freedom to have one’s voice heard, and freedom to develop a voice worth hearing. One way to think of the society in which one would like to live is to think of the kinds of voices it would have” (Hymes 1996: 46).

Education and Voice

Education can be defined as the institution that organises learning by bringing together teachers (at least one) and learners (usually more than one) in a given space (e.g., a regular classroom). Learning, or the process of transferring knowledge and/or competences is always a communicative activity, involving verbal and non-verbal interaction between a teacher and students as well as between students.

This is where voice comes in. In plain words, voice is about *who* says *what* in *which* way to *whom*. The concept of voice highlights the connection between what gets said and who says it. Voices, in education and elsewhere, are always situated, socially determined and institutionally organised. A point fairly easy to make with respect to educational settings is that teachers’ voices are differently positioned and evaluated than pupils’ voices. Other voices that make up the nexus of education include the principal’s voice, the parents’ voices, the politicians’ voices, the curriculum designers’ voices, the textbook writers’ and publishers’ voices, the inspector’s voice, the neighbours’ voices and the media’s voice or voices. Thus, voice is first of all a sociolinguistic concept that focuses our attention on the various agents within educational settings.

Voices are also ideological, i.e., they contain explicit or sometimes more implicit ideas about language and social relations, or in the case of educational discourses, about education and language in education, as well as about identity. Different stake holders in education have different invested interests so their voices show traces of their respective interactional and institutional positions. Within the study of educational voices, we cannot assume that the different actors are always consciously aware of their voice(s) and actively choosing what sort of voice(s) they produce. If educational research on voice is indeed occupied with the sort of discourses that are heard in a particular socio-cultural space, it should equally be occupied with the processes through which identifications and interests in the classroom are (un)authorized, (il)legitimate and (un)marked – thus with what gets left out (Kulick 2005).

As voice or voices provide the concrete material to work with in qualitative studies of language and education, i.e. the actual or micro discourse to analyse, it is important to contextualize these voices with respect to macro issues of power and inequality. And it is precisely this ethnographic perspective that gives us “an awareness that discourse is contextualized in each phase of its existence, and that every act of discourse production, reproduction and consumption involves shifts in contexts” (Blommaert 2001: 26; see also

Silverstein and Urban 1996). Voice is that perspective, embedded deeply in ethnography, that offers a method to investigate educational discourses as an arena of (conflicting) contact between different actors, their identities, identifications, desires and interests.

Voice therefore is an “analytical heuristic” (Hornberger 2006) for an empirically-based sociolinguistics or linguistic anthropology of education. Through studying voice, we can search in our data for instances of conflict, inequality and power as well as resistance, creativity and counter-hegemonic practices. Voice provides a tool for finding and dealing with alternative understandings of language, education and society. Taking ordinary educational voices seriously has the potential to challenge our scholarly understandings of our research object and its subjects, and to renew our theoretical and conceptual apparatus.

In this paper, we first outline the academic etymology of the concept of voice in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (which are more or less synonymous to us). We then address the question of individual vs. social voice, and place the notion of voice as a central concept in an ethical ethnographic research program, as a methodological tool for empowering research subjects. Finally we elaborate this ethical program by linking voice to a democratic vision on education and society.

Theories of Voice

Voice is a concept with quite a lengthy history in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology dating back to Jakobson (1960) and Bakhtin (1981 [1935]). For our purposes here, we will concentrate on Jakobson’s pedigree since the work of the Bakhtin Circle has not been available in English until the 1970s with the publication of Vološinov’s (1973 [1929]) *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and thus has not directly influenced sociolinguistic and anthropological thought until more recently (cf. Moore 2009: 321).¹

In the 1960s sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, voice has been tied to language and context and has been developed both in dialogue and in opposition to Prague School structuralism. Jakobson’s structuralism reached the United States in the late fifties and early sixties, it was influential to a number of founding fathers in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics (including Hymes and Gumperz), and it carried with it a strong emphasis on form-function relationships. Jakobson’s (1960) own focus on poetics tied back into Bakhtin’s preoccupation with literary texts and stylistics or the study of poetic devices, and it directly fed into the emergence of the “ethnography of speaking”, launched in the 1964 volume of the *American Anthropologist* (Hymes 1964; see Bauman and Sherzer 1975 for a historical review).

Ethnography of speaking has found its way into many handbooks of sociolinguistics as a model for studying the interaction of language and social life. Its success is largely due to the mnemonically convenient acronym of speaking with a contextual factor for every letter of the word (Situation, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, Genres). As a model it is an imperative for descriptive holism rather than an instant recipe to be routinely applied to various communicative events.

¹ Since the nineties, of course, there has been increasing attention to Bakhtin’s work (e.g., Bauman 1992). Bakhtin’s definition of voice is closely tied to the internal stratification of language, or “heteroglossia”, the varieties of linguistic forms that exist within a single language and that are functionally mobilized depending on the context of use or the social group one is affiliated with (Bakhtin 1981 [1935]: 263). Building on that insight, Bakhtin’s narratological work (e.g., 1984 [1930s]) makes formal analysis central and can help us understand the tension between emergent performance and genre characteristics. For a further discussion of Bakhtin and voice, see Pietikäinen and Dufva (2006) and also Copp-Jinkerson (2011) and Dong and Dong (2011).

Hymes in his work with Native American storytellers and their respective narrative traditions insisted on restoring lost voices by reformatting Boas' Native American fieldwork texts as poetry. He argued that by doing so "some of the original poetic qualities of the voice can be heard" (2003: 121). The preoccupation with restoring lost traditions also found its way to linguistic anthropology, and to current critical efforts of language documentation and salvation (see e.g. Moore et al. 2010). The concern with voice thus arose out of this particular school of ethnography and was largely developed further in two directions: an interactional and a narrative one.

The interactional tradition was spearheaded by Gumperz (1982), and focused on how the quality of voice (prosody in context) is interactionally realized and leads to particular (mis)understandings. Possible elements of misunderstanding and, by extension, of misrecognition and exclusion are e.g. accent, intonation and bodily hexis (Fenigsen 2003). Gumperz' (1982) contextualization cues – later reconceptualised as (metapragmatic) indexicality (Silverstein 1993; see also Gumperz 2003) – are largely interactionally realized linguistic features that are immediately recognized as "marked", "deviant" or "different" from the norm.

The second tradition is occupied with voice from a narrative point of view. Michaels' (1981) groundbreaking study of sharing time, with her attention to what happens with African-American children's stories when they are told in school, shifts the focus from the immediately recognizable conversational markers to a problematic understanding of deeper structures at the level of syntax. Voice then becomes both personal and social in the Bakhtinian sense, and both become so intertwined that they are in constant dialogue. The structure of African-American children's stories, their voice, became automatically problematic when told in an institutional environment led by a white American teacher.

Another strand was added by Dell Hymes' research in ethnopoetics, first with Native American stories as recorded by Boas, later with re-analyses of educational narratives, among them the ones studied by Michaels (see also Van der Aa 2011). In 1981, Hymes published his first ethnopoetic anthology, and in it analyzed Native-American myths for which he had no recordings (Hymes 2004 [1981]). Being unable to pay attention to actual voice quality, he found other ways in which the stories were "voicing" form and content. He attempted to "make patent and to explicate their rhetorical power as verbal art" (Silverstein 2010: 933). At first this was done by paying attention to actual voices of characters in the stories told (Hymes 2004 [1981]), but later developed into a full-fledged methodology to find larger patterns and relationships in children's classroom stories (Hymes 1996). These "larger than syntax" relations were subsequently not recognized by the teacher and led to social exclusion. Cazden (2001), for instance, insisted on the actual inequality in teachers' recognition and appreciation of children's narrative styles. Blommaert subsequently developed an "applied ethnopoetics" that allowed him to dissect the linguistic misrecognition during asylum seekers' bureaucratic interviews (Blommaert 2006; Blommaert 2009; Maryns and Blommaert 2002). By doing so, he pays attention to larger patterns of exclusion in encounters with authority, and reconciles both traditions outlined above. In this issue, we bring both traditions back to educational settings.

Jakobson's structuralism and the ethnography of speaking has in its turn also influenced two closely connected European (mainly British) socio- and applied linguistic traditions, one being "linguistic ethnography", the other the "new literacy studies". Linguistic ethnography is an intellectual program concerned with studying language in various social domains, including but not limited to, education. According to Rampton (2007), its associates hold

1. that the contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assumed. Meaning takes shape within specific social relations, interactional histories and

institutional regimes, produced and construed by agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically; and

2. that analysis of the internal organisation of verbal (and other kinds of semiotic) data is essential to understanding its significance and position in the world. Meaning is far more than just the “expression of ideas”, and biography, identifications, stance and nuance are extensively signalled in the linguistic and textual fine-grain (Rampton 2007: 585).

Developed in overlapping time and space with linguistic ethnography, the new literacy studies were developed in reaction to what Street (e.g., 1995) has termed ‘autonomous models of literacy’ – literacy as an independent technology of the mind and as an absolute distinction between industrialized societies and primitive people (Goody and Watt 1963). Street critiqued this notion and showed how literacy is not an abstract technology with intrinsic consequences for society and cognition, but always ideological. With Street, NLS associates hold (1) that literacy is a situated practice that derives its social significance from the locality in which it is practiced and that reading and writing occupy rather diverse functions in various communities as they are integrally linked to cultural and power structures; and (2) that in any society literacy is an unequally distributed resource which reproduces old and produces new inequalities (see also Papen 2005; and Bartlett 2008 for recent discussions in relation to educational development). Prinsloo and Baynham (2008) have called for “renewing literacy studies” by expanding “the earlier focus on literacy as text” to a thoroughly multimodal understanding of literacy, including visuals and other semiotics (compare with Kress 2003; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001).

The ethnographic study of semiotic resources is fundamental to the study of voice in education, because voice is something that is produced through these resources by people who have invested interests in them. Therefore it cannot suffice to study a transcript without contextualising the actual persons involved in its making, including the ethnographer, or without taking into account the semiotic means on the basis of which this interaction is triggered. Thus, an analysis of a sixth grade science classroom episode needs to account for the macro and micro education policy of the school, the pedagogical biography of the teacher and the semiotics of the science textbook that it uses and its discursive history.

Our Voice or Voices

So far, we have avoided the question whether voice needs to be understood as a singular or plural concept. We assume that any voice is always both singular (unique or individual) and plural (shared or social) at the same time. It may be useful, therefore, to conceive of anyone’s individual voice as being multivocal or polyphonic, i.e. as reflecting the influences of other voices in one’s voice (Pietikäinen and Dufva 2006). A school principal for instance may speak as a principal in one occasion, as a parent or as a member of a local community on another occasion, and maybe as a sports fan at yet another moment. When the principal speaks as a principal, the principal’s voice may contain traces of other voices, and reflect the school’s official discourse, his or her personal experiences as a teacher and other less identifiable sources. The individual or the group that has produced voice, may do so in a way that is expected from the particular voice type he or she is associated with. When a principal suddenly speaks with a different voice, he or she may not be heard.

An illustration of this point is provided by Medina and Luna (2000) who investigated voice issues of Latina professors in U.S. higher education. Their researches asked for a

contextual knowledge and understanding within the academy. Their plea, carrying feminine voices, was not heard because it was considered “too emotional and not appropriate for the university” (2000: 62). By carefully reconstructing the life narratives of these women, Medina and Luna empower voices that are considered vulnerable within the academy.

Within applied linguistics, Pavlenko (2007) has similarly pleaded for including autobiographic narratives (language memoirs, linguistic autobiographies, and learner’s journals and diaries) as research data (see also Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004). Canagarajah (2004) for instance, explores how multilingual writers negotiate the rigidly defined and imposed conventions of (English) academic writing and struggle for voice, which he defines as the “manifestation of one’s agency in discourse through the means of language” (see also Lillis 2008).

As it is impossible to observe people’s behaviour when they are not being observed, educational, linguistic and anthropological research inevitably has to deal with the voice of the researcher as well. This observer’s paradox as formulated by Labov (1972: 43) in his variationist sociolinguistic work, is not a problem for ethnographers in so far as we factor in this researcher’s voice and study its effect on other voices. As we cannot erase the researcher’s presence from the scene of research, we cannot overcome this paradox, but we can deal with it, first of all by acknowledging that the researcher *has* a voice. This voice is “heard” quite literally when asking questions, but also when reporting about the research, in itself a very polyphonic practice involving selecting, introducing and commenting on other voices. Conservative conventions of academic writing prescribe that the researcher’s voice be made invisible as much as possible by hiding it in an impersonal “objective” writing style marked by passive tenses and the *nous scientifique*.

We want to call attention also to our voices as researchers and as writers, for these voices are ideological as well; and studying them may lead to useful reflective insights about our object of research. Also, as non-native writers of academic English, we are evidently struggling to find a voice and have seen our voices change and grow in the process. We also realize how much our voices have been shaped and rearticulated through critical exposure to numerous other voices while working on this article.

The Ethics of Voice

Ethnographic approaches to language and education research entail a commitment to the lived realities of ordinary people in their everyday lives (see Blommaert 2008; Cazden 2001; Heller 2007; Hymes 1996; Rampton 2005 [1995] for excellent examples). Ethnography aims to build understanding of the messy, chaotic reality of social life in real time, mainly through talking with and listening to actors in the environment that is being investigated. In the case of ethnographies of education, this environment entails everything that happens in and around schools, and the actors include students and teachers in the first place, and local and central decision-makers, parents, etc after that.

Doing ethnography means working with human beings and gives rise to a range of ethical issues that need to be dealt with in a respectful manner. Ethics is not, or should not be, primarily an institutional affair but is in the first place a problem of inter-subjectivity, of human subjects relating to other human subjects. In this way ethics becomes very firmly anchored in discourse and cycles of discourses, and becomes a problem of voice as well. The question to ask ourselves then is: Whose voices are being heard in ethnographies?

The work of Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton and Richardson (2006; 1992) provides a useful entry point for this discussion. They suggest that there are three positions researchers may take up in relation to the people they work with. The first of these is an ethical position

which involves an awareness and attempt to minimise “the potentially exploitative and damaging effects of being researched” (Cameron, et al. 2006: 139), directly as well as indirectly, on the short term as well as on the long term. The second position is one of advocacy, and involves the researcher getting involved in local concerns and agendas and using “her skills or her authority as an expert to defend subjects’ interests” (2006: 139) as service to the researched community in return for the knowledge that was shared. The third position ethnographers may take up is one of empowerment and this does away with the positivist notion that researchers need to keep distance from the object of study in order to be objective.

We may refer to the people we work with in ethnographic research as “ethnographees” and acknowledge their work and input more consciously. The relation between researcher and researchees, or between ethnographer and ethnographees is a particularly precarious relation and is key in the construction of ethnographic knowledge, which is always intercultural communication (Briggs 1986; Fabian 1995). In the process, however, we always risk silencing the voices we want to empower. According to Warner (1999: 69), the often public funded institutions we work from sometimes serve to “obscure the identities and silence the very voices of the peoples for whom they claim to express concern”. This is a fundamental problem that can be addressed by acknowledging our ethnographees’ voices more consciously. As research with an ethnographic agenda falls or stands with the input given and collaboration granted by human subjects in the field, taking voices from the field seriously is only a natural thing to do (see also Pennycook 2007). Evidently, there can be no ethnography without ethnographees.

The Vision of Voice

So far, we have argued that there is much to gain by working with voices in educational research. The ethnographic potential of working with voices in educational research is twofold. Both have to do with the opening quote of this article, in which Hymes links issues of voice to issues of democracy and freedom. Before we sketch the potential of voice, we must turn to issues of inequality.

In an article entitled “Inequality in language: taking for granted”, Hymes (1992) sketches the underpinnings of this ethnographic potential for voice. He points out that while we take the potential equality of languages for granted (also in education), we bluntly ignore the actual inequality of languages in education. As an institution of the state, education does not only empower or create opportunities for everyone, but also disempowers and enforces a particular order. This is poignant with respect to what Painter (2008), referring to Dolar (2006), calls the domesticated or the nationalized voice:

While language is [...] certainly a symbol and instrument of national unification, standardization and mobilization, it equally is an instrument of diversification, hierarchization, and restriction of movement. [...] Language also facilitates the reproduction of the state by distinguishing between different kinds of human subject: between natives and immigrants; between citizens and non-citizens; between different economic classes; between racialized groups; between metropolitan elites and those from rural areas; and between the hegemonic national culture and those who are identified or identify themselves as “ethnic” or “minorities”. This is not primarily a question of some having “voice” and others being left “voiceless” in the representational structures of liberal democracy. Rather, one’s voice, one’s audibility, literally positions one within and in relation to the state (Painter 2008: 178).

The solution to this problem of disempowerment lies in Hornberger's (2006) take on voice, in its "activation". Through putting emphasis on the revitalization of particular sociolinguistic resources (indigenous languages in Hornberger's case) we can "activate indigenous children's voices [in order to] enable them to negotiate along and across the various continua making up the development, contexts, content and media of biliteracy" (2006: 284). It is precisely this activation that ethnographers can collaboratively accomplish with ethnographees in education.

Here we return to the twofold vision of voice of the opening quote. This vision consists of a negative and a positive freedom: (1) to bring out inequality by investigating which voices are unrecognized or misrecognized; and (2) to empower those voices that deserve to be heard through qualitative contributions from the field, advanced by ethnographees or native researchers themselves. In both cases, analyzing voice becomes a matter of empowerment. Voice is more than semiotic artistry, it is a real problem for real people in educational contexts across the world. Or, as Dong & Dong (2011) write, "voice [...] is a single word definition of the essential problem of communication, the problem of how one makes [one]self understood". The vision of voice is a democratic vision: it is about analyzing actual inequality and reimagining potential equality.

Using voice as a heuristic to investigate the ways in which different educational actors make sense of school life, allows for detailed ethnographic descriptive analyses of educational discourses that are cumulative (in and around school), comparative (across worldwide contexts) and co-operative (with regards to our own ethics as ethnographers).

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